
The Courtship of Neetchen: An Excerpt from Peter G. Epp's Novel, *Eine Mutter*

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Peter G. Epp (1888–1954) emigrated from Russia to the United States in 1924. He had attended a seminary in Russia, had been a student for a time at the University of Heidelberg, and had received his Ph.D. degree from the University of Basel, Switzerland, in 1912. Peter Epp continued his academic pursuits in America also. He taught Russian and German at Bluffton College and at Ohio State University for more than twenty-five years. In his leisure time, he wrote novels and short stories about life in the Mennonite colonies of South Russia.

In Peter Epp's major work, *Eine Mutter*, an old woman named Agatha Epp relates the history of her father's descendants. Epp's narrator describes a rural way of life constantly threatened by industrialization, urbanization and political upheaval. The war of 1914–1918 and the revolution which followed brought suffering and violent death to many of her family. However, old Agatha, or "Agatchen" as her friends call her, can also provide the reader with some lighter, happier accounts from her past. In the following excerpt she tells the story of her daughter Neetchen's courtship, an intrigue in which she herself became involved.

Peter Epp's stories capture a way of life that was unique in the history of the Mennonite people. The Mennonite colonies in Russia virtually constituted a state within a state and their culture, which had evolved over a period of 150 years, was forever destroyed by the collectivization which followed the Russian Revolution of 1917. The characters in these stories, however, are not too different from people anywhere at any time in history.

Certain words from the original have been left untranslated. Readers familiar with German and with Mennonite culture will appreciate the

fact that these words lose much in translation. A short glossary has been provided at the end.

The Courtship of Neetchen

It may seem strange that an old grandmother like me should tell love stories. But when a love story has such a happy ending — twelve healthy, bright children — it is worth telling. All this happened about 40 years ago.

The Klassens were a well respected family in our village. Their oldest son, Hans, became my son-in-law. Hans was two years older than my daughter Neetchen, an intelligent, polite young man, as were all the Klassen children, but very quiet and shy. Hans and Neetchen were no longer going to school when they first fell in love, but they were not yet old enough to participate in the organized social activities of the young people. This meant that they very seldom saw each other. Just what started that love affair, which caused both of them so much heartache, I don't really know. Even Neetchen, who told me everything years later, couldn't remember how it began. All she could remember was that one day, when she had been feeling unhappy for some time, she had realized that she was in love. It developed innocently enough from there, more or less as follows. My daughters Neetchen and Mariechen always went to church regularly. So did Hans and his brothers. The boys usually arrived at church first and stood around outside the men's entrance for a while. My daughters had to pass by them, on the brick walk which led to the women's entrance. This gave them an opportunity to greet one another — Neetchen with her big bright eyes and happy, beaming face and Hans, somewhat paler and more serious with just a hint of a smile visible on his lips.

The boys and girls would exchange smiles and say, "Good Morning." That was all, but it was an important ritual for my dear Neetchen. She would spend the entire week, six long working days, anticipating and preparing for those few seconds on Sunday morning. On Sunday afternoon the waiting would begin. At this stage in the affair she did not confide in me. Only much later did I hear the full story.

One Sunday when she came home from church there were tears in her eyes. Without saying a word, she changed her clothes quickly and helped Mariechen put dinner on the table. I heard her sobbing quietly, however, even though she was doing her best to control herself. Then, just as we were about to sit down to eat, she ran into the *Eckstube* and remained there for quite a long time. Mariechen, who was always quick to feel compassion for others, went to the door and asked Neetchen if she wasn't feeling well. Our Hans, who was already sitting at the table, was smiling roguishly. The other children didn't seem to notice that anything was wrong. My husband gave me a puzzled look. I told Mariechen to leave her alone.

After we had finished eating, Neetchen appeared again and helped clear the table. Her eyes were still filled with tears and her face, which was usually as fresh as a daisy, was pale and drawn. The younger children soon ran out to play and my husband retired to the *Eckstube* for his afternoon nap. I seated myself in the *Sorgstuhl* which stood in the living room, near the *Ofenecke*, under the big wall clock. I put my feet up on the footstool, which my father had made long ago, and just sat there.

This big *Ofen* I just mentioned was bricked right into the wall and was stoked from the kitchen side. It also divided the *Kleine Stube* from the *Grosse Stube* and had a big duct in which some foods were cooked during the winter. This duct had two vents, one opening into the *Kleine Stube* and the other into the *Grosse Stube*. My chair stood near the vent in the *Grosse Stube*. By leaning forward a little I could look right through the slightly opened vents into the *Kleine Stube*.

The two girls had just finished sweeping the floor. Neetchen was sitting on the *Schlafbank* which stood against the wall under the two windows. She was resting her chin on her hands. Mariechen was standing near the table watching her. Then she went over to Neetchen and put her hand on her shoulder.

"Why are you so sad, Neetchen?"

I could hear every word from where I was sitting. Neetchen covered her face with her apron and said nothing.

"Can't you tell me?" Mariechen pleaded.

Neetchen shook her head.

"He wasn't there this morning, that's it, isn't it," Mariechen said.

Neetchen nodded.

From these little hints, from Neetchen's complaints and Mariechen's attempts to comfort her sister, from their talk and the tears, I was able to get a fairly clear picture of the whole sad state of affairs. The two girls had gone to church at the usual time. However, when they had passed by the men's entrance, no Hans! Then, just when they had entered the church, she had seen him sitting there, on the men's side, in the very back row. The bench where Neetchen usually sat with other girls her age, on the women's side, was somewhat nearer to the pulpit. All she had seen as she had entered the church was the back of his head. She could not see him from her seat without turning around and, of course, this would have been most improper. Besides, had she done that he would have thought he was quite important.

"Why are you so annoyed about this?" Mariechen wanted to know.

"Why wasn't he outside with the others?" Neetchen complained.

Those two words, "Good Morning," the brief, friendly glance and the hesitant smile spreading slowly over the otherwise serious face had all been missing this Sunday. What a thunderbolt out of the blue! A beautiful Sunday completely ruined! How would she get through the long, long

week ahead? And what if he wouldn't be there again next Sunday? With these and many other similar words she expressed her disappointment while Mariechen listened patiently.

"Are you in *love* with him?" Mariechen asked finally. The word "love" had been carefully avoided up to this point.

"No!" Neetchen said, her voice trembling with emotion. "Of course not. I don't love him at all! He'd better not think that! He just wanted to hurt me, and I won't forgive him for it."

"Why do you think he would want to hurt you?" asked Mariechen, surprised.

"Why didn't he wait for me then?"

"Maybe he did. Maybe he thought we weren't coming today and so went in before we arrived."

"But we weren't late!" Neetchen replied. "In fact, we were a little earlier than usual. I know because I looked at the big wall clock just before we left. No, I'm very angry with him, very angry!"

She heaved a deep sigh after speaking these words which came right from the heart.

"I wish I could die," she added, almost as an afterthought.

"I can certainly understand how you feel," Mariechen sympathized. "It's terribly sad. But, perhaps it will still work out for the best."

"How can it?" Neetchen went on. "No, no, it's all over, all over!"

These two girls went on like this for a good part of that afternoon. I heard most of it and was amused but also deeply touched because for Neetchen it was a very serious matter. This childhood sorrow may well have caused her more pain at the time than many a sorrow she experienced in later life when she was more mature and better able to cope with disappointment.

A restless week followed. My dear Neetchen had no energy for either work or play. She even lost her appetite. She would sometimes sigh deeply in her sleep, as children do when they fall asleep after much crying. I found that week long too, because I could hardly bear to see my child in so much torment. My husband also noticed Neetchen's depression, but I didn't want to tell him her secret yet. When he suggested that we should take her to see a doctor, I told him it was just a minor matter that we women could handle by ourselves.

The next Sunday something happened. When we sat down for dinner, Neetchen again refused to join us. She seemed even more disturbed than the previous Sunday. After we had cleared the table, I again took my customary place in the corner, next to the *Ofen*, from where I could see, through the vents, all that was going on in the adjoining room. Neetchen came into the *Grosse Stube* and threw herself on the *Schlafbank*, in tears. Mariechen was close behind.

"But Neetchen," Mariechen was saying, "he was at his usual place again today. And he certainly wasn't trying to hurt you in any way. Why are you so upset? He was standing there at the church door, waiting, but you turned away from him and you refused to say 'Good Morning' to him and now you're lying here crying!"

It took me some time to make sense of all their outbursts and exclamations.

"Surely you can't be angry with him today," Mariechen insisted.

"Oh, I'm so embarrassed about what happened today," Neetchen moaned. "This is even worse than what happened last Sunday. Now I can never bear to face him again!"

"Why did you turn away?" asked Mariechen. "Why did you do that? Now he'll think that you despise him. To turn your back on him and not even say 'Good Morning,' to just walk by him like that. Only people who hate each other do that! Listen, Neetchen, I'm as unhappy as you are when I see you like this but I still can't understand why you torment yourself like this!"

I peeked through the vent. My dear, soft-hearted Mariechen, who couldn't bear to see anyone suffer. She was responding to the honest, genuine sorrow of her sister as only a child can, but she could not understand it as an older, more experienced person might.

"Why did you do that?" she asked again.

"I don't know, Mariechen. I can't explain it myself."

"Why not?" Mariechen asked, amazed. "Is it that hard to smile at somebody and say 'Good Morning'? I did it."

"It was easy for you," Neetchen groaned.

"Weren't you happy when you saw him there at the church again? When I nudged you and whispered to you that he was there, I could see that you were pleased.

"I was, I was," cried Neetchen, "but when we came nearer to them all the muscles in my face were suddenly paralyzed. I just couldn't smile and I was so embarrassed I turned away — I couldn't say anything. Didn't my face look horrible? And now it's all over. There's no hope. How could any boy love a girl with a face that looks like three days of rainy weather?"

Once again she embraced her sister and sobbed loudly.

"Would you like me to talk to him?" Mariechen volunteered, innocently. "I'd be glad to do it."

Neetchen sprang up, terrified.

"Are you completely out of your mind Mariechen?"

The loud, strong voice with which she asked this question seemed inappropriate to her sorrowful mood.

"Well, why not?" Mariechen wanted to know. "I can do it. I'll just go over to Klassens and ask Hans if he's angry with you. If he says he's not, I'll tell him you aren't either and everything will be just as it was."

"No," Neetchen replied, "that is simply out of the question, that's impossible."

"But why?"

"He might get the wrong idea."

"How so?"

"He might think I'm one of those girls who chases boys. And I'm not."

Mariechen gave her sister a sympathetic look. For just a fleeting moment she looked like an anxious, worried grandmother.

"I really don't understand you," she said after a brief pause.

"Of course you don't understand," cried Neetchen, annoyed with her sister. "That's because you don't know anything about love affairs!"

Now it was Mariechen who became impatient.

"Maybe I know more than you think," she snapped.

"What do you know?" Neetchen sneered.

"I know that when you love somebody you don't refuse to give him a smile!"

"Just wait till you fall in love! Then you'll know how painful it can be," Neetchen complained, her eyes filling with tears again. "And what hurts most of all is that you, my very own sister, don't care if I die of a broken heart!"

Now Mariechen was at her wit's end.

"You're being very unfair, Neetchen," she said. "I feel just as much pain as you do because I see how unhappy you are and yet I don't know what I can do to help."

By now both of them were crying. After they had given way to their tears for a time, they gradually began to compose themselves. They even managed a few, flickering, weak smiles.

"Do you know," Mariechen said finally, "I have a feeling that everything is going to turn out well."

"Do you really feel that way?"

"Yes!"

"And do you really believe it?"

"I'm sure."

Neetchen stood up, her eyes suddenly darting fire. Her hands were clenched.

"I'll tell you one thing," she said, "even if I do forgive him, someday I'm going to rub his ears so hard he'll feel them for three days. That's what he'll get for treating me this way!"

Again Mariechen looked puzzled.

"But he didn't really mistreat you."

"He *tormented* me," Neetchen insisted.

This was clearly beyond Mariechen's comprehension. By this time Neetchen was so exhausted from all the excitement, the crying and the

scolding, that she collapsed on the *Schlafbank*. She turned a few times, back and forth, stretched, placed one hand under her cheek, closed her eyes, heaved a deep sigh, which I could hear clearly through the heating vent, and fell asleep. Sunshine always follows rain. Joy always comes at long last to those who sorrow. And so too it would be with my Neetchen. Even that same Sunday evening I thought that color had returned to her cheeks and that she appeared to be in better spirits.

The next Sunday, however, Hans, once again, was not at his usual place in front of the church. This time Neetchen was so silent and gloomy she wouldn't even speak to Mariechen. As soon as the table was cleared after dinner she went into the *Eckstube* and seated herself at the window with her hands under her chin and stared dejectedly out into the cruel world. After she had been seated like this for some time, Mariechen approached her, put one hand on her shoulder and looked down at her with a sad, compassionate expression on her face. Neetchen, however, recoiled from the physical contact.

"Leave me alone!" she said angrily. "I don't want to have anything to do with anybody!"

Mariechen stood silent for a moment next to her sister. Slowly she withdrew the hand she had placed on her shoulder and walked sadly back to the kitchen. All was quiet in the house now. I was sitting in my chair, the *Gebetsbuch* which had once belonged to my grandmother open in my lap. Behind me I could hear the big wall clock ticking. I had again placed my chair so that I could see what was going on in the *Eckstube*.

Neetchen remained motionless for almost an hour. Then she stood up and came slowly into the *Grosse Stube*. She was a bit unsteady in her walk and she seemed undecided as she came toward me. She glanced at the wall clock and then at me. I stretched my hand out to her, casually, and she drew nearer. Then she sat down on the arm of my chair, put her arms around me and put her head on my shoulder. She was taller than I was by this time and so young and beautiful that when I felt her next to me I thought to myself: "What a stupid boy this Hans must be. If only he knew what a treasure could be his." But he was probably suffering in much the same way as Neetchen was. These young people certainly behave strangely when they fall in love. Their behaviour sometimes strikes us older, more mature people as a bit silly.

Neetchen didn't know, of course, that I had overheard almost every word that had passed between her and Mariechen, and so she told me the whole story, from the very beginning. She was completely preoccupied with her own personal frustrations. I myself had never experienced any of this. As a young girl I was always more adult and sensible, in spite of my vivacious temperament, like a little grandmother even then, according to my brothers and the apprentices in my father's smithy. I certainly never had the time to sit at the window of the *Eckstube* and cry for an hour

or longer about an unhappy love affair. When my first husband asked me if I would be his wife, I immediately looked straight into his eyes, smiled and said, "Yes!" When my second husband came to court me I didn't consent immediately but that wasn't because I had been hurt by some real or imagined slight. No, I don't think I was ever in love the way Neetchen was. I could actually hear her heart throbbing as she sat next to me on the arm of my *Sorgstuhl* that day.

I didn't really know what I should say to her or how I might comfort her. Finally I could do no more than express the same intuitive feeling that Mariechen had already expressed. I told her that I was sure all would work out for the best.

"I don't see how that can happen," she said. "I don't believe it's ever going to work out now!"

"What if he is just as unhappy about it all as you are?" I asked.

She looked at me astonished, her eyes wide open.

"You mean, he feels as much pain as I do?"

"Maybe more."

"And he's sitting at the window and crying?"

"Not exactly. But he might still be feeling very miserable all the same."

"Why, then, is he so — so stupid?"

"Why are you so — so proud?"

"I'm not. It's just that I don't know how he feels about me."

"And he doesn't know how you feel about him."

She heaved a deep sigh.

"Then we must be the unhappiest people in the world. But I can't go on like this, mother. I think I'm going to die. Oh, what am I going to do?"

"Nothing, my child. Just wait patiently and we'll see what happens. All in good time, my girl."

"But, what if he thinks I'm angry with him, because I made such a face and refused to greet him that Sunday morning? I couldn't help it. I don't know what came over me. I feel like such a fool. Should I apologize to him myself or should I let Mariechen explain everything to him?"

For a moment I too became a little bit angry with this boy who was causing my daughter so much heartache. Not that I wanted to rub his ears, as Neetchen had put it earlier, but I wanted him to feel some pain also. I decided we shouldn't make it too easy for him.

"No, no, Neetchen," I said, "don't do anything. Just wait for him to take the first step."

"You said that he might be feeling as hurt as I am," Neetchen objected. "What if he's waiting for me to apologize, just as I'm waiting for him? Then nothing good will ever come of all this! What then?"

Now I was at my wit's end. For once I could not draw upon my own experience. I couldn't even tell her how those romantic novelists might

deal with such a situation since I have never been fond of reading their books. I had to rely on common sense and intuition. I decided, finally, that this Hans was not likely to find another girl comparable to my blushing young Neetchen anywhere in our village. And so I was able to sound very self-assured.

"Child," I said, "just let events take their course."

"Only God can help me now," Neetchen said solemnly.

"And I know He will."

"Maybe there is still some hope," she said suddenly, her eyes lighting up.

"Of course."

Quickly she dried her tears. Then she threw her arms around me and kissed me so many times and so passionately that I began to wonder if all those kisses were really meant for me. When Neetchen left the *Grosse Stube* a few minutes later, her step was almost as quick and light as it had been before this affair had come to take up so much of her time. By this time, even I was a bit curious to see how it would all turn out.

On the following Sunday Neetchen and Hans met and exchanged smiles and greetings as usual but not without a little embarrassment. After dinner I overheard Neetchen and Mariechen once more.

"Why is it," Neetchen asked, "that whenever I walk past that church door my heart pounds terribly and my knees tremble and feel-weak. Does this happen to you too?"

"My pulse remains normal at such times," Mariechen said, "and I don't feel any weakness in my knees. I don't know. I think you've been reading too many love stories."

This was enough to plunge Neetchen into despair once more.

"Maybe this means that it will end too the way it so often does in the novels," she said. "If it all comes to an unhappy end I don't want to live."

The next Sunday Neetchen stayed at home all day. I didn't try to change her mind in any way even though I knew that her stubborn defiant mood would only lead to remorse and more unhappiness. I found it more and more difficult to watch her suffer and I began to ask myself if I shouldn't somehow try to help, although I didn't know what I could do. Some events are better left to run their course, I decided, and we would all just have to wait. Fortunately, this complicated problem was resolved without any further interference on my part. I have in my time tried to help many sick people and I have seen people recover their health even after everyone had given them up for lost. But never have I seen a recovery so sudden and so complete as Neetchen's. Her cheeks glowed again and her eyes sparkled with all their former radiance.

It happened this way. One day I sent Neetchen to the store to buy a pound of coffee. Actually, there wasn't a real store in our village. People bought most of the things they needed in Halbstadt or Takmak. How-

ever, David Krueger often purchased more than he needed for himself and then would sell or barter items like coffee, sugar or soap. It was on this ordinary errand that the fateful encounter took place. Neetchen was coming out of the front door of Krueger's house when she ran right into Hans who was just coming in. Neetchen was so taken aback that she dropped the bag she was carrying and the coffee beans spilled all over the *Beischlag*. At that moment something happened which had never happened at church on Sunday mornings. They both looked into each other's eyes and then broke into laughter. The formality and propriety of those meetings at the church were overcome in an instant as they stood there surrounded by coffee. Soon both were on their knees, face to face, busily picking up the scattered beans.

"Tell me, Neetchen," Hans asked laughing, "aren't you angry with me now?"

Neetchen could only laugh in reply.

"If you're not angry with me," Hans continued, becoming more serious, "you might even learn to love me."

Neetchen stopped laughing and looked at him, helplessly, as young girls sometimes will. Then she did what she had been threatening to do for a long time. She took him by the ears and kissed him.

"Yes, I think I could love you," she said and they both laughed again. "And I'll always give you a smile when we meet at church too," she added, "if you promise to always wait for me at the usual place."

"I promise," he said solemnly.

Glossary

Beischlag a term used in the Moloschnaya colony when referring to the front steps. People would often sit on this structure, either on benches or on the steps.

Eckstube literally "corner room". This was a room which faced the street. It served as the parents' bedroom.

Gebetsbuch prayer book.

Grosse Stube the largest room in a Russian Mennonite home. This was the room in which guests were entertained and lodged.

Kleine Stube literally "little room". Family meals were often taken here during the winter. It was also the room in which the children and the maid slept.

Neetchen diminutive for "Nettie".

Ofen, Ofenecke oven. oven-corner.

Schlafbank a bench which could be opened up to make a bed.

Sorgstuhl literally "worry chair." It was associated with the older generation.